

# Prairie Words

*Celebrating the romance of the West,  
cowboy poetry got its start around campfires a century ago.  
Today it is still a popular part of western folk culture*

BY JUDY WAYTIUK



STETSONS FIRMLY CLAMPED ON sweaty brows, three adults and one boy in his early teens sit stiffly on child-size chairs, facing their audience from a worn plank stage in the creaky second-floor assembly hall. It smells faintly of late-summer hay, worn wood, a little dry manure and hard-baked soil. I remember the same rich whiff from my childhood: my grandfather's farmhouse.

The building, erected in 1910 as a school, is now the Jasper Cultural and Historical Centre in Maple Creek, a town of 2,400 tucked into the southwest corner of Saskatchewan and named after the nearby trickle of water that meanders lazily through pasture and prairie. The creek becomes impressive only during spring runoff, when it is full of melted snow. In dry years, parts of it evaporate almost completely. This has been a dry year.

The four shifting carefully on their rickety chairs are cowboy poets. They have come to the annual mid-September Cowboy Poetry Gathering and Western Art Show. Two years earlier, as I was passing through the Cypress Hills on my way to Calgary, I saw a poster for the coming gathering. On a schedule then, I could not stay for it. But this time I have made it, pulled by the landscape and the rich history and romance of cowboy culture. Half a dozen times I have checked out of my local Winnipeg library an old copy of *Wolf Willow*, a book by the Pulitzer prize-winning author Wallace Stegner about his childhood in south-



western Saskatchewan and neighbouring Montana in the early 1900s. I finally bought my own copy. I have brought it with me.

About 90 poets and "pickers" – guitar or banjo players – and nearly 40 artists and artisans are in Maple Creek this September weekend. The poets and pickers play at half a dozen venues in town. Merchants sell tack, boots, Stetsons, horse blankets, artwork and western-style clothing from the back room of the legion hall.

This gathering has become part of an informal circuit across Western Canada and the Midwestern United States. The poetry's cantering rhythms – and occasionally awful rhymes – have caught the hearts of rural prairie people on both sides of the border. There are chapbooks of poetry, tape cassettes and CDs. There's even a video featuring Doris Bircham, a "cowboy" poet and cattle rancher who hails from a ranch near the town of Piapot, not far from Maple Creek, and who is a moving force behind Western Canadian cowboy poetry and the gathering here.

"I've written poetry since I was a child," she says. "I just didn't know for a long time that's what it was." The roots of all cowboy poetry lie in the soil, she believes. "The grass, the prairie, is our lifeline, you know, and I guess I feel really intensely about it. I've been to the mountains, I've been to the ocean, and I always want to come back to the prairie, where I can see."

CHRISTOPHER LEMAY



## Cowboy

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Cowboy poetry is a long-preserved, still-evolving part of folk culture that got its start around campfires in the late 1800s. Much of it is pure doggerel, but it carries the romance of taming the West, sitting tall in your saddle, squinting into the setting sun. Today's cowboy poets may put pick-up trucks and tractors into their rhymes, but the poetry still blends storytelling, cattle tending, easy humour and hard lessons. In big cities, gatherings attract thousands; in this isolated cow town, perhaps 400 take in each recital.

Some of the poets are bunking at Maple Creek hotels, but most have brought their own accommodation: a cluster of motor homes – an aluminum-sided wagon train – park on the broad lawn behind the Jasper Centre. Frank Gleeson, a poet and lifelong rancher from Williams Lake, B.C., leans against one of the motor homes.

"I guess I started when I was a boy," he says. "Use'ta write poems about the girls in class and pass them to other boys. Then when the teacher caught me, I'd hafta make a spitball out of 'em and throw 'em. But then I didn't write any more for 50 years. Started again four years ago. Like to put humour in. People like to laugh, y'know?"

Poets on break occupy folding lawn chairs set up in shade cast by the motor homes. They swap road stories and wait for their next turn up.

The three-day gathering occupies the Jasper Centre, the legion hall, the old armoury, the



lawn behind the Southwest Oldtimers' Museum and the Cypress Lodge seniors home. Each year, the gathering spills over into the agricultural grounds – the High Chaparral Arena and neighbouring Second World War vintage airplane hangar, dubbed the Drill Hall, where ranchers and farmers hold sales, rodeos and roping contests outside and auctions inside. During the Cowboy Poetry Gathering there's either a horse auction or a stock-dog show, where ranchers can eye or buy the finest cattle-herding dogs. This year, it's a horse auction – the Cypress Hills Registered Horse Breeders Association's 21st Annual Production Sale. I stop to watch, standing beside the bleachers, and I fall in love with the first animal to be auctioned, a skittish four-month-old sorrel filly. "I tell you what," coaxes the auctioneer. "She's got everthin' goin' fer her, just as well marked as you kin git." The brown-and-white-dappled filly dances nervously on the straw-covered stage as she's walked back and forth. She sells for less than \$1,500; had she been exhibited later in the auction, she would probably have fetched more. Afterwards, I see her in the stalls with her new owner.

The filly has a red bridle on; a young woman is stroking her and talking sweetly, calming the tense youngster. Envious, I drive back across the railway bed to the Jasper Centre.

Frank Gleeson picks up the chest-high podium that's standing in his way on the stage, sets it

firmly to the side and perches himself on a high stool. Framed by bales of hay on which blackened cook pots and campfire coffeepots have been littered, he recites a comic piece until he loses a line. The audience sits still, polite and trusting, while Gleeson hitches up his glittering silver, scenic belt buckle, backs up his train of thought and starts her forwards again. The missing line comes, and he rolls on, smooth as a night train on a late summer's evening, reciting his poem about a rancher beset by the taxman:

*I'll fix the fence where the sheep they went through.  
I'll put them back in the corral.  
And I'll turn my hogs in the neighbour's old field  
Although he might be madder than hell.  
And I won't have that old taxman bugging me  
Or putting me right through the test,  
And he can take his phone and his old fax machine  
And stick 'em where they'll fit the best.*

Gleeson finishes off with a polite, quick nod. The young Maple Creek poet Mark Elliott, clutching a scribbler of poetry he has copied out in case he forgets a line, steps up. He is reciting the work of others; either he hasn't begun to write his own or he doesn't want to share his efforts yet. The rangy adolescent is visibly nervous. Still, his recitation has the right feel – he manages to evoke the spirit of the wide-open prairie.

When you stop to look at it, the wild prairie can still your heart. Doris Bircham's poem "On the Move," published in the cowboy poetry anthology *Riding the Northern Range*, describes it as a place...

*...where  
crested wheat usually greens in the spring  
heat waves ripple across each summer  
and in fall the ditches are goldenrod-lined  
in winter when the coulees are bowls  
full of shadow there's still a place  
for dreams*

*our neighbour goes south now  
for the winter, he says even the geese  
have enough sense for that  
my husband says, where else  
could we feel each season's heartbeat  
and where else but here can the wind  
fill each empty space*

"There was never a country that in its good moments was more beautiful," wrote Wallace Stegner in *Wolf Willow*. "It is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people. But not humble ones."

Maybe that explains the sprawling sweep of the history of this place. Out here, Canada came late; by the time the railway pushed through, the first ranchers had been driving cattle up from the American Midwest for more than 10 years, hiring cowboys out of places like Fort Benton, Montana. Many of Western Canada's first cowboys arrived this way. Others made their way from Ontario. With them, in 1873, came survey teams crossing the Northern Range – the northernmost sweep of prairie on the vast central plain that stretched like a wide sea of wild grasses up the middle of North America. The surveyors marked the new border, the 49th parallel, with small cairns, cutting a straight line across what bison, Indian tribes and early cattle drives all had treated as a single whole: the prairie. By the late 1880s, the bison were gone, to be replaced by cattle.

Eighteen seventy-three was also the year of the Cypress Hills Massacre, when as many as 100 encamped Assiniboine Indians are said to have been slaughtered. Thirteen American "wolfers" – cowards who killed wolves for their skins by setting out poisoned meat – boasted later that they had wiped out the entire encampment in retribution for a suspected horse theft. The Assiniboines' offer to replace the wolfers' single lost horse with a brace of their own bony animals was spurned, and the shooting started. The Assiniboines had few guns; bows and arrows were no contest for rifles. Only one wolfer died. It later turned out the Assiniboines had not been the horse thieves the wolfers sought.

The killings outraged the Canadian government. The West was ripe for settlement, but law-abiding families ready to come west could not be expected to endure this kind of violence. Ottawa pushed



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through legislation already drafted to create the North-West Mounted Police, who were hastily outfitted, set on horseback and sent west. Arriving in 1875, they built Fort Walsh out of lodgepole pine logs on a meadow below the south-facing escarpment of the Cypress Hills.

Thirty-two kilometres south of Maple Creek, the Cypress Hills landmass juts up, a green, utterly unexpected plateau. The glaciers that scoured the rest of the country flat had flowed around this outcrop, the highest point of Canadian land between Labrador and the Rockies. It is a 250,000-hectare island of bright, liquid life: clear lakes fed by streams full of trout and beaver. Deer, moose, bobcats and hundreds of kinds of birds shelter in the forests of 18-metre-high, die-straight lodgepole pine. It is generally 10 degrees cooler here than on the surrounding prairie, and damp, no matter how dry the flat land below, where wild prairie grasses curl in on themselves to save what moisture reaches them.

Highway 271 angles southwest from Maple Creek, crossing the soft curves of unbroken fields for 60 kilometres to the Fort Walsh National Historic Site. It's an odd thing, but not all the prairie is paper-flat. It undulates, and one feels as if one is in a row-boat on a sea of huge, slow-moving swells. The land around the Cypress Hills is like that. During tourist season, the small, rebuilt fort is peopled with "Mounties," and Farwell's Trading Post, a small log building stocked with souvenirs and ersatz pioneer staples, is open. By the time the poets gather in September, however, Farwell's is closed, and activity at the fort has wound down.

Back at the Jasper Centre, Mark Elliott's voice, fluttering between baritone and treble, filters into the old building's hallways. One floor up, a replica of the Grand, Maple Creek's first theatre, built in 1903, is plastered with movie posters advertising *The Canadians*, starring Robert Ryan "charging across the great Northwest ... living the adventure that saved a nation – from the killers Custer couldn't stop!"

The movie, a Hollywood melodrama from 1961, has long been out of circulation, much to the disappointment of Jasper Centre volunteer workers, who would dearly love to get their hands on a copy to run in the little theatre. They know the old movie is about the time in the late 1870s when Sitting Bull fled to this part of Canada after Custer and the Little Big Horn debacle. The film is riddled with red-coated heroes on spirited black steeds, sweeping battles and bloodthirsty war cries – all of it pure, wildly imaginative fiction.

In truth, Sitting Bull and his people felt safe with the North-West Mounted Police. South of the 49th parallel, which they called the Medicine Line, the United States Cavalry, loathed by the native people, wore blue and sided with whiskey traders. North of the border, the North-West Mounted Police dressed in red and strongly discouraged both whiskey and weaponry. Sitting Bull and his people eventually returned to the United States, however; they ran out of food, and the Mounties told them they had to go back. Dwindling bison herds could not support growing numbers of aboriginal people, and while the Canadian government had begun running cattle herds to feed natives who were literally starving, the Mounties were told to dole out food only to the "Canadian" Indians. "American" Indians were sent back across the Medicine Line.

Today, drowsing at the fringe of the soft amber curves surrounding the Cypress Hills, Maple Creek and its grain elevators are visible from the Trans-Canada Highway.

The town has no shopping malls. It has an ice-cream parlour, grocery store, baseball diamond, swimming pool, golf course, skating and curling rinks and the Southwest Co-op, the ubiquitous rural hardware store that also carries food and assorted kitchen and furniture items. The trees shading the wide streets were planted in the early 1900s by optimistic pioneers. There are four Chinese restaurants, requisite for any Prairie town built along the railway, where, inevitably, a few of the Chinese labourers brought in to lay track stayed on to open restaurants or laundries. The CP Rail line runs east and west along Pacific Avenue; grain elevators sit on the siding.

Once the biggest hotel in all the territories, the three-storey Commercial Hotel on Pacific Avenue faces the grain elevators. Built in 1883 by T.C. Power Brothers of Fort Benton, Montana, the hotel was expanded in 1911. By the 1920s, however, the



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